

Night of the Living Dead

By Jim Trombetta

KENT. *Is this the promised end?*

EDGAR. *Or image of that horror?*
"KING LEAR"

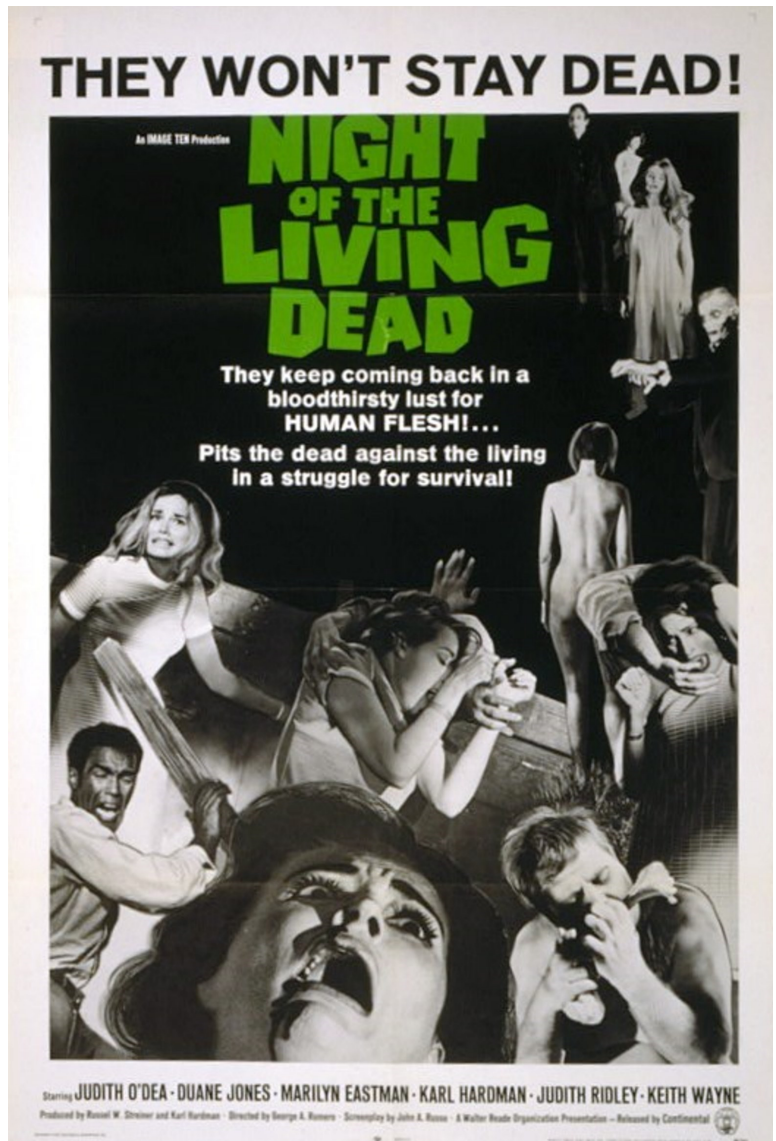
There are no zombies in "Night of the Living Dead" and no talk of them either: I don't believe the word is even spoken. By far the most common term used by all the survivors to define their attackers is simply, *thing*--as in "I ought to take you out and feed you to those things." In this context, *thing* is a scarier word than *zombie*, because the speaker is confessing that what he has seen beggars language itself.

The dead and living look nothing like each other, a World War II tank officer asserted, and the change between states can come blindingly fast. Their sometime resemblance to the regular human race notwithstanding, the living dead are rarely, if ever, mistaken for the merely living; at times the dead seem like Gorgons, as when Ben (Duane Jones), who's just used a crowbar to penetrate the brain of an invading predator warns Barbra (Judith O'Dea), "Don't look at it!" It's no wonder that Barbra wails, all too appropriately, "What's happening?"

"Night of the Living Dead" is one of the few films to embody such deep confusion, even aphasia or blindness about the living versus the dead. If, as it says in "Genesis," that God made man in his image, that image is exactly what is eclipsed during this night. Even the mind of the law is boggled. The newsman asks Sheriff McClellan how it is that these entities can be alive and dead at the same time, the sheriff can only mumble, "Yeah... they're dead... they're all messed up." Well, Schrodinger had the same problem.

As if the word *thing* were wearing out, the newscaster promulgates a new, if hardly reassuring, official term that, as it happens, seems most appropriate. The word *ghoul* brings with it a subtle stink of the grave mixed with a release of digestive fluids--a hunger even for human flesh, even in its most distressed of conditions. *Ghoul* also preserves a tenuous connection with the supernatural tradition; the ghouls' hunger, as we shall see, partakes of the infinite.

There was nothing infinite about the budget of "Night of the Living Dead." It triumphs over the \$114,000



Original release poster. Courtesy Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Online Catalog.

that was spent on it; even its flaws, if that's what they are, work for it. Black-and-white footage lends the outrageous tale a documentary feel. A few silly lines? They are long forgotten, even overwhelmed, as the film presents its virtuosic, beautifully-timed action sequences.

For instance, some scenes may come across as less "Night of the Living Dead" than day-for-night-of-the-living dead, but remain completely riveting. I'm thinking of Ben's torch weaving through a crowd of the undead--like a dance--as he makes his way back to the house. Of course, once Ben gets back, Harry (Karl Hardman), pain-in-the-butt *paterfamilias* of the Cooper clan, won't let him back in.

The relentlessness of the film and the scope of its horror can mask subtler interplay between its characters. Ben, hammering and nailing as he boards up

the windows, tries to explain to Barbra what his first meeting with the undead was like. An oil truck went off the road and blew up. Ben can "still hear" the driver "screaming," as he himself realized, "I was surrounded by those things." Barbra, in a state of shock, doesn't react, so Ben assumes she hasn't heard, or listened to a word he's said.

After a beat, though, Barbra picks up the baton of the conversation, telling Ben about the first ghoul's attack on her brother. Now it's Ben's turn to pay zero attention as if her account were trivial. But how much is there to choose from between a man screaming in flames and a dead man--single-minded, to say the least--chasing you through dark fields at sundown? The movie consistently demonstrates that trauma is indivisible.

Ben's own experience is strange, not because it's so uncanny but because it's so weirdly commonplace. Harry Cooper, unseen until he bursts out of the cellar door, is greatly relieved to encounter genuine humans hiding in the living room. But when Ben comes pounding into the room to see what's up, Harry acts as if he were not really there. As has been noted many times, not only is Ben the only African-American in the movie, we never hear a peep about it. Harry's inability or unwillingness to recognize Ben may not be prejudice, exactly, but it could live next door. Ben's humorous shrug is eloquent: he may have had to play Invisible Man more than once in his life.

Ghouls make no bones about their nature, or their predicament. Rotting they may be, yet they are also incorruptible. They're loyal only to their own special dreadfulness which has less to do with violence or even cannibalism, but *insatiability*. You can't stop them and they never quit. The ultimate consumers, they are trying to eat the world and everybody in it; they can't be scared off, bought off or, despite the sheriff and his gunmen, necessarily fought off.

At what the sheriff will later term a "cookout," a party of ghouls makes loud lip-smacking, chewing sounds as they pluck cooked human flesh out of a burning truck. A couple plays tug-of-war with the small intestine of a recently-deceased cast member--a vignette that anticipates Harry and Ben struggling over the rifle in the last act.

One great ghoulish performance (and there are any number of them) is a fellow in a hospital johnny licking a huge rib (possibly obtained from a slaughterhouse by the filmmakers) while jerking his head spasmodically over his shoulder. I've seen squirrels act much like him. The dead man's attitude indicates two things: 1) he doesn't want company for dinner and 2) he's already looking for more chow. (Marilyn Eastman, who plays Harry Cooper's wife, doubles as a ghoulish insect off a tree.)

Another uncanny trait of the ghouls is their combination of indifference and avidity. Karen's tossing away her father's heart, as if bored and needing novelty, is yet another index of their eternal greed. Ben can hear them walking around upstairs as they cram themselves into the tiny abandoned living room which has no space for them.

Toward the end of the movie, the sheriff is guardedly optimistic. The numbers of the living dead seem to be thinning, he says; he last encountered a few of "them" trying to break into a shed, adding, "They must have thought there was somebody in there. They wasn't though."

It seems that these jokers have themselves lost, or discarded, or maybe lacked in the first place, a meaningful perception of the difference between human and nonhuman, the living and the dead. That final gust of flame from Sheriff McClellan's torch, as he sets fire to a stack of bodies, is a holocaust in the literal sense (a "burnt offering"), but it's hard to tell what deity it could ever placate. It's just another barbecue, with the sheriff himself getting to play chef. It is also a prophecy of horror supplanting tragedy as our major dramatic mode.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

Native New Yorker Jim Trombetta was educated at Middlebury and Yale, and later worked as a media executive, including senior research analyst for CBS Television. He is the author of numerous franchise-spawning television dramas including Miami Vice, The Equalizer and The Flash. His most recent work, an analysis of banned horror comics of the '50s titled The Horror! The Horror!, was described by New York Magazine as "cheerfully gruesome."